

Speaker Jetton's Opening Address

Sets New Tone

[Formal introductions and thank you.]

Every two years a new Speaker takes a few moments to talk about the direction the House will take in the new legislative session.

Thanks to your support it is my honor as your Speaker to deliver a few brief remarks on our future together over the next two years.

Today, I stand before you not to dictate exactly what the house will do, but hopefully to lay out a few guidelines and goals that will help us, yes all of us, both Republican and Democrat, those from rural, urban, or suburban Missouri and make this a better state to live in.

I have been in the Missouri House for four years: two years in the minority and two years in the majority. I have had an opportunity to see the process work from both sides of the fence. In my four years I have seen too much partisan fighting and not enough working together on the issues effecting Missouri's citizens. I have seen too many representatives worrying more about how a bill effects their re-election than how it will affect our state.

We should represent our districts, we should be proud of our party, BUT we should never let our party or our interest in getting re-elected overshadow what is best for the state of Missouri as a whole.

We also have a new development that has made it harder to pass laws in Missouri- Term limits.

Term limits have changed Jefferson City. No longer do we have experts who have heard both sides of an argument for 10 years and know the history of what has been done.

We need rule changes that will allow the bulk of law writing to be done in committee where hopefully we have members from both parties who have become experts in that area of the law.

We also need to change the way we debate the important issues facing Missouri. We should follow the federal example of setting time limits on debate of major bills. This time should be split evenly, yes evenly, between the Republicans and Democrats.

This would improve the process in three ways:

Ensure that both the majority and minority have a chance to make the best case for their position.

Allow the leaders of each side to let the most knowledgeable members on that subject to debate the merits of their argument.

Cut out occasional comments from members that simply play to the press or inflame partisan fighting.

For four years I have heard how partisan the leaders of the House have been. My first two years it was how bad the Democrats were. My last two it has been how bad the Republicans have been. In my view it wasn't the Democrats that caused partisan bickering and it's not the Republicans. It was a system that was designed to foster debate on issues. Unfortunately that system ended up fostering partisan bickering that all too often turned into personal attacks and killed good legislation. Debate should NOT be about sound bites, but substance.

We can change that. We have great people from all over the state of Missouri that have been elected to serve this state and they sincerely want to make things better.

Do we agree on everything? No we do not, we have major disagreements on how to make Missouri a better place to live, and many times these disagreements do not break down along party lines, but I have learned over the last four years that we all want to make this state better.

Let me give you an example. Representative Barbara Fraser from St. Louis county and I have totally different views on almost every major issue. I am a bit more conservative than she is...well, okay I'm much more conservative than she is. Over the last four years we have debated one another many times. I am sure she wonders how I can be so wrong on so many issues. Most observers would see no reason why Representative Fraser and myself should be friends, but that is exactly what we have become over these last four years. You may wonder why?

Well, it's because I learned that she sincerely wanted to make this state better. That she was a teacher, she had children, and she cared about people, just like me. What I discovered was Representative Fraser wanted the same things I wanted. She wanted this state to be better; she was just taking a different path to get there.

Do I always agree with her? No. Does she always agree with me? Certainly not. Can we work together to find solutions to Missouri's problems that hopefully will make this state better? Yes, we have before and we can again!!

This House should adopt a system of rules that allows for spirited debate on the merits of an issue. A process that is constructive and produces good laws that will make this state better. One that will give the minority a chance to have active participation in developing laws and ensures their voice is heard; while still allowing the majority to make certain the business of Missouri gets done.

These changes will create the most bi-partisan rules ever adopted by the Missouri House.

You are probably asking why with 97 republicans and a 31-vote margin I would advocate such a change.

It's a good question, and the same one Representative Jeff Harris asked me when I shared these ideas with him. It's also the same question many of the members of my majority caucus asked me when I first talked about these changes.

Very simply, the reason we should add these changes is because it's the right thing to do for Missouri.

Why not change the system and allow for constructive debate on the important issues of our day? Why not try to improve our process and write better laws? We must remember that the citizens of this state have to actually live by the laws we pass. We owe it to those we serve to do our very best to consider all the ramifications of each and every bill we pass. These proposed changes will help us do that better.

My grandmother had a simple saying that applies to our rules, "Good better best, never let it rest, until your good is better, and your better is best," let me say that again. "Good better best, never let it rest, until your good is better, and your better is best."

Our system is good. But it can be better and we should strive to make it the best it can be.

Besides talking about our rules there are two principles that we should remember as we are tackling the tough issues affecting our state.

Personal Responsibility

Self Interest

Personal Responsibility- we should always try to design programs that encourage and reward personal responsibility and independence.

One program that encourages personal responsibility is the Bright Flight Scholarship Program. The program is designed to help Missouri students go to college. High school students who get a 30 or higher on their ACT receive the scholarship, which is worth up to \$10,000 over 5 years. However, in order to get and keep the money there are standards the students have to meet. They must go to a Missouri university, they must stay enrolled full time and they must maintain a minimum grade point level. This program has helped over 8,100 students go to college in the last year alone, and has kept them in college by holding them accountable to a level of performance. Thanks to this program there are many hardworking students getting state assistance to further their education. Isn't this the model that we should look to as we address the issues of the future?

When we ignore the importance of Personal Responsibility we end up with programs that reward failure, breed abuse

and deprive the truly needy of vital services.

Also, when passing laws we cannot forget about the influence and greed of self-interest.

Let me give you an example.

I recently received a letter from a constituent in Marble Hill

She told me how she and her husband had been swindled for over \$50,000 by a crooked contractor. He told them he needed the money upfront in order to purchase supplies and labor for the project. But he took the money and used it for something else, never ordering the supplies and never doing the work. This contractor was prosecuted but got off on a technicality. Then in civil court he admitted to defrauding the couple. However, he quit doing business to avoid repaying the money he received for services he never gave.

Now my constituent has to live with an unfinished house, a loss of tens of thousands of dollars and no one to turn to for help. State government has a responsibility to recognize that sometimes due to greed and self interest people get hurt. In these instances we must act!

With these principles of Personal Responsibility and Self Interest in mind, we must spend this session working to tackle the major issues facing our state.

There are four things we must accomplish this session
Building a stronger economy and creating jobs
Make government more accountable and spend every dollar wisely
Properly fund needed services AND
Protect the traditional family values that made our state great

There are three pillars to rebuilding our fragile economy.

First we must pass meaningful legal reform that will keep doctors and jobs in Missouri!

Next, we must reform our broken workman's compensation system, to protect both workers and employers.

Finally, we have to hold MODOT accountable and build the roads Missouri needs!

By growing our economy and creating jobs we will bring more revenue into state government to fund needed services; while at the same time holding Missouri government accountable.

We can do this by looking for areas to cut the fat out of the state budget, by continuing to root out the waste and inefficiency in our state bureaucracy and cutting programs that are ineffective and unproductive.

When the economy is firing on all cylinders and the unnecessary fat is cut from state spending we will be able to better fund needed programs like education, social services, and healthcare.

Our first responsibility is to our children. They deserve an education second to none and we must create a formula that is fair for every child in Missouri.

All of our work to improve our economy, preserve our tax dollars, and fund our most necessary programs mean nothing if we turn our backs on the traditional family values that form the foundation for this great state. We are entrusted with this duty to protect our ways of life.

Thankfully, Missourians already joined together and overwhelmingly ratified traditional marriage. But we cannot afford to assume the battle is over. And we must resist those who would manipulate the Constitution to justify eliminating God from our society.

These issues are not Republican or Democrat. These issues are important to all Missourians.

If you have a wreck in your car on the road no one asks if you are a Republican or a Democrat you just need help. If you are a kid in Marble Hill Missouri attending school in a poor rural district, it doesn't matter if you're a Republican or Democrat you just need a good education. If you lose your job and can't pay your bills, nobody cares if you're a Republican or Democrat you just need a job.

What matters is that we are all Missourians and we all have an obligation to use the positions we have been given to work for a better Missouri.

The reforms proposed today are not designed to stop spirited debate on the important issues. It is my hope that we can foster a system that encourages vigorous and principled debate on all the important issues. Whether we are working on legal reform, welfare reform, transportation, or education we will pass better laws for Missouri that will make this state better if we keep our focus on the issues and not on personalities or parties.

I believe if we go forward with a bi-partisan spirit of cooperation, and consider how personal responsibility and self-interest affect the laws we pass we will be successful.

May each of us in two years look back and say we built a better Missouri.

I want to leave you with one last story. As a history major, I love to read about our founding fathers and the start of our country. At the Constitutional Convention the Federalist and Anti-Federalist members were at odds about our Constitution. They vigorously argued their points several times and it almost broke up in failure. But they came together and produced one of the greatest documents ever created, one we still live by today.

After it was over, members of both sides thought that they had given in too much and due to the compromises, believed it would be a failed government. We know that they succeeded on a grander scale than they ever could have imagined.

Many times, over the last four years, I have felt strongly that I was right on my point of view. I didn't want to give in to any other idea. But also, over those four years, I have thought about our Founding Fathers and how they compromised even when they thought they were right and through their compromise gave us the best government ever.

I hope we can all follow the example of our Founders and work together in a bi-partisan way to make this state better.

If we do, I am confident that we will look back in two years and know that we have given our citizens the best state and country to live in.

Thank you, God bless you, and God bless Missouri!